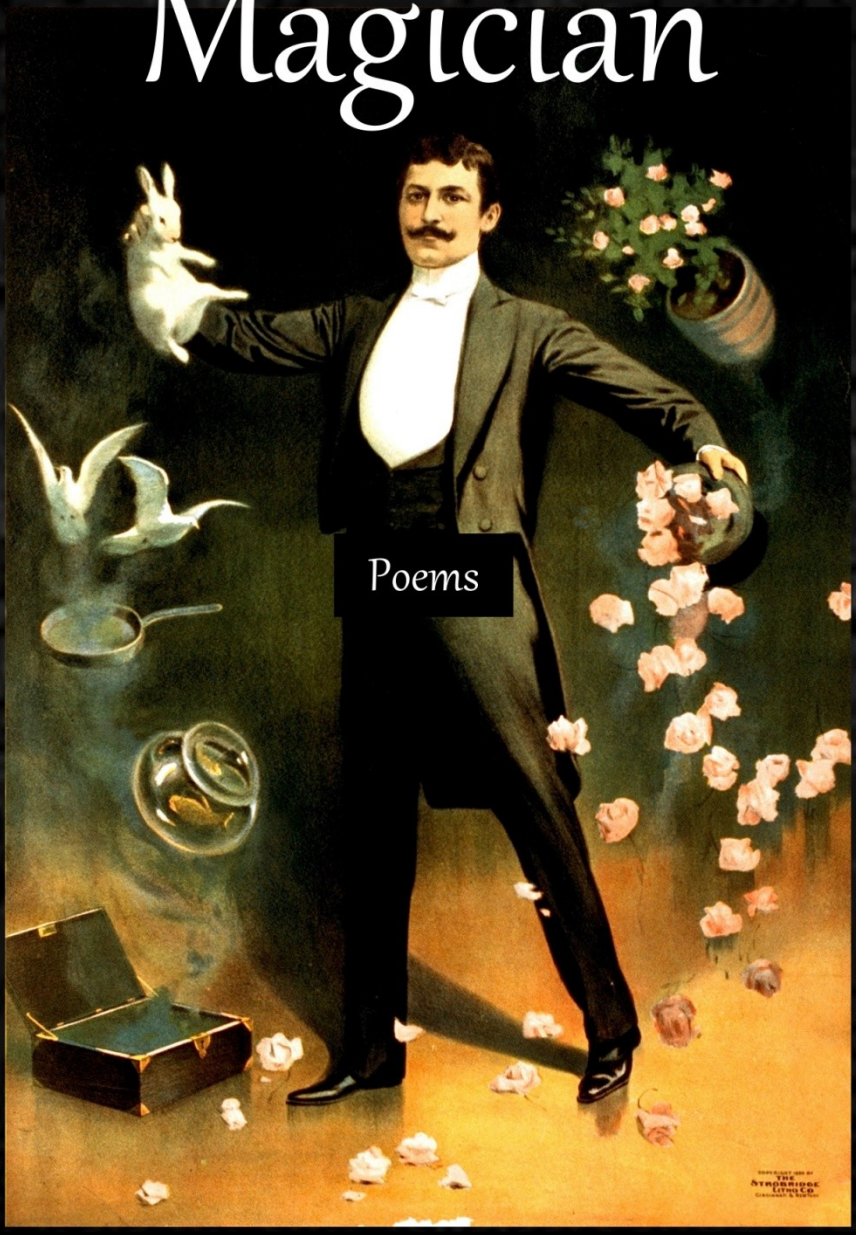
Like an Astonished Magician



Poems

Jack Preston King

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New Paradigm Press

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How to Be in Love

"The fact that we say 'romance' when we mean 'love' shows us that underneath our language there is a psychological muddle." — Robert A. Johnson

First, forget everything
you've ever heard about
romance, which is to love
as chocolate is to
food. As Hershey's Kisses
are to kissing. Not a thing

to be despised, but not the thing
itself. Romance makes everything
fleeting seem eternal. Kisses
sweet on lips, they whisper on about
moments becoming lifetimes, and two
hearts forever ravening in love.

But that really, in the end, isn't love,
though it might be love's beginning. The thing
about romance is what it leads to,
or doesn't. It promises everything,
but delivers just about
what you'd expect, burning kisses,

all flash of light and fire. While ember kisses
stirred between two lifetimes twined in love
and years, those romance doesn't know about.
And that's the thing –
Romance is, indeed, the door to everything
our yearnings for completion pin to

roses, candlelight and wine, to
famished lips and fevered kisses,
but the door is not the everything
it opens to. Romance is not love.
And "how to be in love," now that's the thing
this poem is about.

Here's all you need to know about
where romance can lead to:
Like fire, Love is more a process than a thing.
Beyond first flaming kisses lie those kisses
like nestled coals that warm all winter. Love's
a journey shared that leads to everything.

About that door of romance, all those kisses:
Walk through, then journey, heart to heart, toward love,
till from the thing emerges everything.

Impermanence

The great Japanese Zen master Dogen
graced us with this poem: *"Being-in-the-world*
To what might it be compared? Dwelling in
the dewdrop, Fallen from a waterfowl's
beak, The image of the moon." Everything
persists for but a moment, then is gone.

What makes life beautiful is knowing it
must end—and quickly, too. Cherry blossoms
bloom at most two weeks, then pinkly carpet
green grass winter soon enough will whiten.
Babes die into youth die into lovers.
Moms and dads die finally to the grave.

The bird above, the lake below, the moon
in you and I, the sun that glimmers our
descent. This now. This instant we're alive
with all the stirring beauty in the world
won't last—but look at how it shines! You're why
all I ever want to write are love poems.

You and Me, We Inter-Are

"If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper… So we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are." — Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing*

All things arise from something else –
This paper, the pen, the ink, the stamp,
the woman or man who drives the mail
to your box along the gravel road,
the road itself, those boisterous men
who cleared the road, who spread the rock,
who dug the limestone from the hill,
the Earth that raised the hill… *But let's*

not take this all too far. Let's speak
in simple words of simple words
like *love*. Like *you*. Like *me.* Like how
words strung across a page must lead
back to the pen, and how the pen
leads to the hand that raised the pen,
the heart that stirred the hand to move,
the *you* that woke my heart… *Let's try*

this one more time. I write these words
to point beyond these simple words
toward *something else* — that thing the *you*,
the *me*, the *love,* the hill, the rock,
the road, the box, the mail, the ink,
the paper, pen, the hand, the heart
spin into being — this *inter-are*,
this *ever-us,* this startling *we.*

Making the Tree

"God has the tough end of the deal. What if instead of planting the seed you had to make the tree?" —Jim Rohn

We're making the tree, you and I.
We're branches reaching to the sky.
We're braided roots that bore and bind.
We're sturdy trunk. We're storms defied.
We're shade protecting tender eyes
We're home to all that nests and flies.
We're growing straight where we decide.
We're crooked where our hearts contrive.
We're not like others of our kind.
We're Supernature. Rare defined.
We're out of nowhere. Sheer surprise.
We're love. Embodied. Reified.
We're shaking Nature's alibi.
We're making the tree, you and I.

No Surprise

It's funny how those things that we expect
the least somehow always seem to happen
when we least expect. We really shouldn't
be surprised. And yet, we'll say of every
out of nowhere speeding car or falling
Easter snow, *we never saw it coming*.
What should be no surprise has once again
surprised us. And that's always how it feels,
even after all these years together,
to find my heart, so practiced in your presence,
speeding, falling hard toward what I never
see coming every time. My head and heels
sent spinning by your kiss. Surprised by falling
in love that should be no surprise—*again*.

True North

Behind this seemly tie, just left
of where the silvery clip restrains
the freedom of its fabric — there,
inside the cage of curling bone
in which my body wards its fragile
turning, lies a heart as free
of questions as a compass pointing
North again, and always North,
no matter all the turning world,
and you, my North, and my heart finding
you, and finding once again,
in all the round and turning world,
but one True North, one sure direction
all the turning world must turn
in reference to, if it would my heart,
fixed by Nature's Grace on you,
in all its turning plans include,
for where you are, there's my world turning
North, as every compass learns
by Grace to find itself and turn.

Things That Ripen

Ideas, for instance,
falling out of nowhere
we can see, like fragile
helicopters testing
their whirligig luck
on, at best, their one
in a million shot
at fertile soil, then
boom! Giant Maples! (boom! Big Ideas!)

Or that kid
16 and drunk
who crashed his car
on the high school
parking lot. *Loser*,
we whispered. Today
he's Superintendent of Schools.
No bigger man on campus.
That guy sure bloomed where he was planted.

There's our daughter
on her own a solid
three years already? Just
look at her. At 21
I thought I saw a rock star
shining in the mirror, and you
were living with that gangster.
She's already harvesting
degrees and sowing seeds of rich tomorrows.

And then there's you
and me, twin wings, at last
grown feather-light, entwined
around our Big Idea
of all it means to fall
in love and stay there all
the way to summer's end.
Here comes the wind.
We've earned this whirl of readiness. *Take flight.*

Not Falling, Diving

"Cliff diving is defined as the acrobatic perfection of diving into water from a high cliff. Braving the rough rocks, divers take a plunge in the hard-hitting water beneath to experience a thrill to last for a lifetime." —Jimmy Sturo

His outstretched hands clasped palm to palm, as if
in prayer, the trembling diver's feet forswear
cliff's edge, and rushing winds rise to caress
the arc of his descent. Beneath the moon,
a crystal mirror of water, hard as glass,
ascends to crush those pressed and praying hands,
till fingers poised in perfect balance between
his fear and longing cut a purling seam
into that silvery wall. Then in its place,
a doorway opens to receive him whole
into a world whose depths a thousand dives
could never wholly plumb, nor grant his mind
words fitting to enclose the feral truth
now dancing on his skin. In just this way

I entered into you. No words I lay
upon this page dare claim release the breath
held breathless since you rose upon my heart,
a golden moon, my precipice to light,
nor dare they pray the poem of your eyes,
a thousand shades of blue could ne'er describe,
nor whisper intimations of the spice
your skin speaks to my tongue. These yearning hands

still tremble, pressed forever palm to palm,
eternally fearful, longing, ever poised
to cast aside the safety words pretend
and hearken to the siren of your voice,
surrendering all I know to once again
into the mystery of your love descend.

You're Why I Can't Believe the Big Bang

"Once this idea is accepted, it is immediately obvious that the question 'What happened before the big bang?' is meaningless. There was no such epoch as 'before the big bang,' because time began with the big bang." —Paul Davies

Imagine once upon a time
there was no time, or even space,
or stars to thaw the icy rime.
Imagine once upon a time
there was no "us." No you. No I.
No "we" yet forged in love's embrace.
Imagine once upon a time
there was no time, or even space.

There was no "us." No you. No I.
No "we" yet forged in love's embrace.
Bereft of when and where and why,
There was no "us?" No you? No I?
I can't believe in words that try
to barter love's eternal grace.
There was no "us." No you. No I.
No "we" yet forged in love's embrace.

I can't believe in words that try
to barter love's eternal grace.
But on my heart I will rely.
I can't believe in words that try
to speak of time before the time
we found love time could not erase.
I can't believe in words that try
to barter love's eternal grace.

Mitigation Plan

"The vendor has not offered a solution,"
the email read, adding that "*We need*
to discuss a mitigation plan." I'm counting

no less than eighty-seven freaking names
on the distribution list—That's every
worker in the office. And I'm wondering

just whose stroke of genius plan it was
to point the eyes of every Chicken Little
to the sky at once? What I see falling

is less the firmament than hope this day
could possibly end well. But then a memory
of you when I brought coffee to the bed,

pulling me beside you, and your kiss
that whispered *stay…* And suddenly I'm listening
for any opportunity to slip

past Henny, Ducky, and all their trembling crowd
of acorn-dodgers. All the mitigation
my plan needs is lessening the space

between me and the parking lot, and you
at home, my earth to fall upon, my sky
to open wide my arms to, lift my face,

invite your rain to dance upon my tongue,
to taste with fearless confidence solutions
the likes of Goosey Loosey never dreamed.

Stuck at Work, Thinking About You Instead of My Job

I do not wish to live
as if I were not alive,
to strive mechanically, like a robot,
performing duties without feeling,
ensuring every loose end
meets exactly in the center,

And remembering you, sleeping
in first light, as though
the sight of your legs,
curled and bare above the sheets,
ought not to remind me
of unrepentable pleasures –

Of gardens, and falling,
and the sweet taste of apples,
and of every good reason
for feeling goddamned giddy
about bodies, about knowing,
about salt and sweating brows,

About 5:00 approaching,
and you, at home, throwing wide
curtains and windows,
and winding green ivy
into rings around candles,
while a tall bottle chills

Like a tart, sparkling promise
we'll spend all night keeping
each other up late
satisfying again –
And tomorrow, this office,
This chair, this routine,

Won't have a prayer
against the heaven we're making,
this blessing embodied
in the memory of kisses,
this paradise, found
in the press of our aliveness.

Let's All Be Witches and Re-enchant the World

"The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting
for our senses to grow sharper." — W.B. Yeats

I'm tired of this scolding
from the haters of magic
who press their dull knives
to the heart of our longing,
who see in Wild Nature
but a mass to be measured,
and in the Soul of All Living,
but an insult to reason

I'm tired of pretending
their methods impress me,
that their double-blind studies
reveal more than blindness
to all they refuse
in advance to conceive
for fear of conflicting
the faith they believe

I'm tired of hearing
that we're only our bodies
from men with no love
for the magic of bodies,
who find in our dreams
but the chatter of neurons,
in our deepest desires,
mere chemical churn

It's time to remember
the *Tuatha de Danann*,
to sleep on the hilfort,
and learn the Sidhe magic,
till the wind has awakened,
and leaves whirl round,
till *"Away, come away"*
rises out of the ground

So, get ready to fly
past the glowering doubters
on your unlikely broom
to the place of our meeting,
our sharing the mushroom,
our dancing and dreaming,
our splitting the veil
that separates worlds

Come join me in singing
to the Earth and the Moon,
in welcoming spirits,
in shaking the barley.
Let's join the wild hunter,
our banners unfurled —
Let's all be witches
and re-enchant the world.

Close the Book and Dare to See

"Man can embody truth but he cannot know it." — W. B. Yeats

This head, this heart, will never bow
to gods found on the bookish rack,
like ordering from a menu — *"Make
mine Christian! Buddhist! Hindu! — Can
I have a side of Tao with that?"*

There is no Truth in books, or words,
not even in my own, when over-
head the lightning splits the sky
and shakes the ground, and blackens trees,
and otherworldly paths appear,

but fail to catch the reader's eye.
You're walking on a goddess, boy!
Don't piss Her off. She's all you've got.
And there between the rows of corn
flit ghosts you'll never read about,

who whisper, as the tassels bend,
their spectral secrets to the wind.
And somewhere in this maze resides
a feast for spirits, souls, and eyes —
Look! Look! Awake! Shake off your sleep!

And listen, boy. Fall out of love
with mirror-gods. The Holy Grail
of mindfulness is not your thoughts,
or even "you." The space between
two thoughts is where you'll find your eyes

and ears and heart ablaze to see
the goddess rising in a tree,
those gods born, myriad, in her leaves
that fall, then covered by the snow,
down, down into her body go.

So you and I—*We rise. We fall.*
We rise again. We heed the call
to turn, and turn, and turn again,
around the mystery we're within
but fail to see by bookish light.

For only what we've lived we'll know
when down into the Earth we go.
And what's reborn will solely be
the you between two thoughts, the me
that closed the book and dared to see.

Samhain Song

For I shall build a world
where it's always Halloween,
where October's always-startling
reds and golds, November's
first frosty grays
meet in merry Circle,
Hecate and Herne,
drunk again, dancing,
kicking up a storm that's sure
to raise, at least, the dead.
North wind stir the cauldron,
breathe to life the Fall
Harvest of Redemption, breaking
bread in Nature's Hall.
Sun's last celebration —
Raise your glass to Winter's call.

Harley's Angels

When Harley was nine he told Mom about the angels
perched like fallen stars
on the windowsill, or maybe the hill beyond,
he wasn't quite sure. He said if he kept
one eye closed his thumb hid their light.
Mom said he needed glasses.

When he was ten he got the glasses
and stared for hours at those angels
still hovering like memories of light,
like remembered fire, stars
he couldn't guess how he'd kept
even a thumb's-breadth away. The hill beyond

now stood solid as an eye-chart, and beyond
that the horizon, the angels… The glasses
put a stop to their dance. Harley kept
one eye dancing up and down the thumb. The angels
stood fast, frozen stars,
the lenses shaping their light

as a telescope shapes and gathers light
that might have gone further, gone beyond
what we know about stars,
what a pair of glasses
can hold—Dancing angels
that in childhood can be kept

like a found dollar is kept
secretly, or how bugs with tails of light
can fill jars with dreams, with angels
that would always remain beyond
Mom's vision; she'd always worn glasses.
Harley suspected she'd never seen stars

the way he'd seen stars,
dancing for his pleasure, kept
at thumb's-length by eyes free of glasses,
eyes that never demanded light
stand still, conform, not go beyond
the sky, not reveal angels…

He kept his thumb high, dropped the glasses
to the desk, and smiled as stars and lights
spread beyond disappointment in a grand finale of angels.

The Smell of Flying Saucers in the Morning

"Above all, there is not the slightest evidence to support the popular fantasy that saucers are interplanetary space ships, manned by beings from beyond the earth, however much some people want to believe in this unscientific, highly publicized interpretation of saucers." – Donald H. Menzel

Swamp gas is beautiful in the moonlight.

It's the ninety-degree

turns at

lightning speed we

can't comprehend — Maybe

streetlights reflected
off the bellies of ducks better

floats

your skeptical boat, but –

What fine ducks, I say.
Two thousand miles an hour,
in the dark, no less — South
must be some place, boy.
At that speed it's a wonder
those radar men get so many
sweeping chances
to invoke their reliable equipment
malfunction, human error.

Some nights I dream
of silver spaceships falling
here from someplace magical — Some
Aurora Borealis world so far
beyond my all-too hard
-evidenced life, it simply
must be
under some kind of intelligent control.

And if I wake in search of
tiny footprints
in the fresh-ground smell of flying
saucers in the morning, or shiver
at the inexplicably inverted
temperature beyond my covers, I can't
help thinking *Alien*
is such an unfriendly term
for what surely now awaits me
in the kitchen — The invasion
of hope such nights bring to morning
out of a clear blue sky no weather
balloon could even come close to explaining.

The Garden Plot

In Russia, they jail their poets — Ten years
busting Siberian ice for even
the least fruitful charge on any
gulag of the heart. Then there's

you, growing wild, in Capitalist Pig America, planting
your Gold Card on the register to charge
Poet's Market: 1800 Places
to Sell Your Poetry! The slacker

cashier is scoffing as he hands you the pen. He's picturing
you washing dishes, taping soaps, playing
bridge with housewives in wall-flower dresses, then
it's off to the garden for sweet tea and sugary

poems about flowers — *lilacs, chrysanthemums…*
struggling for a rhyme and finding only
anthems, battle hymns, war songs. The boy's clearly
fantasy-prone brain sows a Moscow apartment, and you

have sprouted a beret, a tulip-shaped
scar on one cheek like a third eye. Your dirty garden
apron has budded bandoleers. You're gathering
dissidents like daisies for a seasonal centerpiece,

a bouquet of angry poets, blooming
around him like red, red roses. He takes
a cautious backward step. He'll turn
you in. He knows your variety. He

sees right through your shrinking violet veneer.
You'll cut down his children
with words sharper than thorns,
plant your marigold mines in the fertile

soil of his bleeding heart, outside-agitate
his peace lily mind with your
sunflower seditions, your incendiary
poems like snapdragons exploding in his face.

Bone Music

Don't read this poem — unless
you're set to wail, to bellow, to blow
this poem deep and rasping past
the spit-wet reed of your tongue, the unmuted
trumpet of your throat, the vibrant
hollow of your lungs and the space
beneath your lungs, the reverberating
sound-box or bugle of your groin. This poem
must be sung. This poem
is sweet bone music. Careful measurements
were taken while you slept. The length
of your fingers, the distance
between your eyes, the exact physical dimensions
of sinus cavities, elbows, shins, the topographical
hills and valleys of your spine have been
meticulously mapped. This poem
knows you, *fits* you *is* you in song,
a *tympani malleus*
pounding *incudes* to your brain*. This poem
is raising its baton, for the hour
of rehearsals and tuning up has passed. This poem
is sweet bone music, calling you to sing,
to shake at last from your adagio slumber,
to cadenza now to life like once-
dormant strings waking wild to the bow.

* The *malleus* (hammer) and *incus* (anvil — plural *incudes*) are tiny bones in the middle ear that transmit vibrations caused by sound waves from the eardrum to the inner ear.

Like an Astonished Magician

I picture God scratching
his head as the cosmos
BigBangs! into being,
the best 4th of July ever.
Let There Be Light!
simply doesn't do it justice.

It's his trick, so he knows
how he fooled the cheering crowd.
Still, he has to admit
he's impressed. Even he
is *oohing* and *aahing,*
authentically astonished.
Was that hidden in his hat the whole time?

5 Simple Steps to Living Your Dreams

"Those who have compared our life to a dream were right….
We sleeping wake, and waking sleep." — Michel de Montaigne

1. When setting out for work today,
as you're walking toward your car,
let the pulling wind lift you up
through the branches of a maple.
Let crimson leaves caress your skin
like tongues of autumn fire

2. As you rise to meet the clouds.
You always wanted to see God,
and there She is! Oh my God!
He really does have a beard!
And all at once you're naked
in a crowded high school hallway.

3. For once in your life, relax.
They're not laughing at you, really.
Believe they're laughing with you.
Join in. You always wanted
to be seen. It's finally your turn
to shine. Be the star. And for God's

4. Sake answer your phone. It could
be your father finally admitting
he's proud of you. Don't miss
your chance to shed a lifetime
of tears in a single evening. Dreams
tell truths the waking struggle

5. To express. Like how to live
your dreams. Like why to stay
in crazy love with every veiled
wish that makes you you. Like how
it's true we all can really fly
if we give our *yes* to rising.

We Are Our Own Ghosts

To that dream-you, lost
in its reverie of soaring
among puffy clouds
and folks you know well
to be dead, waking up
is the dream. Your day

is its night. Every morning,
your dream-you surrenders
to its sleep in your waking.
Your life is its dreaming
that it barely remembers.
Then, when your day's over,

and sweet dreams reclaim you,
your dream-you awakens
and lives a new story
you'll barely remember
when it's your turn to wake.
But know it can happen,

maybe once in a lifetime,
you'll meet at the crossroads,
your dream-you and you,
that path of exchanging,
that place of forgetting,
and what you'll both see

is a ghost with your face.
Try not to be frightened.
We are our own ghosts.
Our dreams haunt our days
as our days haunt our nights.
Tens of thousands of times

in the course of a life,
we trade in our world
for the other and never
ask ourselves why,
or what it all means,
or why, when awake,

it all seems so real,
and why, when asleep,
it all seems so real,
or which world is waking?
Which world is the dream?
Your ghost is as certain

of the answer as you.
So, if once in a lifetime
you meet at the crossroads,
don't argue. Just listen.
Throw your arms around you
and whisper some comfort.

The real truth is neither,
or both; doesn't matter.
You're here now, and you
are as big as two worlds
that were always embracing.
You just couldn't see it.

You wouldn't believe it—
This ghost of a chance
offered so many times,
once taken, awakens
a *you* beyond all
of your wildest dreams.

My Naked Funeral

Hear me when I say this — please don't
roll your eyes, please don't just pretend
to listen. If you drop the ball and get this
wrong I'll haunt you every day forever.
I mean business. Don't screw with me.
So, this is how I really want it done:

First, everybody's naked — done
up in Nature's finest — Hey, don't
argue. Just write this down. Now, me,
I'm naked, too. I won't pretend
that that'll be a pretty sight, forever
burned into the mourner's minds, but this

baring of our common flesh, this
shedding of pretense, Emperor's clothes undone
to scars and moles, to pigments that forever
reveal us all as equals– these don't
let anybody in the room pretend
the dirt will call them any less than me,

that death belongs to vulgar men like me,
but visits not the worthy few. This
death that rich and poor alike pretend
is someone else's problem, life done
wrong or bad — That just don't
fly before the naked truth. "Forever's"

just a word. When people say *"forever"*
they mean, *"while I'm alive."* Now, me,
I see that as enough. I just don't
get the fear that spurns a gift like this
ephemeral *"All I have will be undone,*
but while it's mine it's yours," this mean pretending

a lover's owed eternity, pretending
we're gonna be here to collect. Forever,
like fashion, is a lie, and what's done
by such deceitful wiles, it seems to me,
must be undone. And this
will be my gift in death to those who don't

know what they don't have, whose feigned forevers
will die to pretense, facing naked me,
and naked them, bared to each other — This is death undone.

What Sees Through

eyes opening
to light, day
one, birth room
crib photo, one
wise finger raising
its wordless, blue-
eyed question
to a waiting blue world

and closing again
upon darkness, one
lifetime later, death
bed scene, one
final breath declaring
itself as such,
the question we are
to this day barely asked,
to this day barely answered

what sees through is God

and what, in the end, all
opening and closing
eyed-things share –
hunger, feeding,
the urgency to couple,
the promise incarnate
in dawn's teasing kiss, night's
moon-call to dreaming –

these are the lines on God's face

and the singular truths
of each seeing life –
who i love, how
you pray, where
she hurts, why
he burns so
for poems, or drink
or the sight of her face –

these are the ocean
those lines, like winding
blue rivers painted
on a globe run to,
where blue tides follow
the moon's dreamy call
to be clouds, and then rain,
then blue rivers again…

for what sees must see through
and what's seen through must see
our mistake is believing
in what lies between

My Religion

"We are holy. All life is holy. Daily prayers are delivered on the lips of breaking waves, the whisperings of grasses, the shimmering of leaves." — Terry Tempest Williams

My religion
Is equality
My religion
Loves humanity
My religion
Pleads humility
My religion
On a good day smells suspiciously
Like a handful of fresh-dug dirt

My religion
Plays with color
My religion
Brews like barley
My religion
Lives in singing
My religion
Swam through boney marrow long
Before this fleshy human brain took form

My religion
Grows in green things
My religion
Breathes in water
My religion
Roosts in treetops
My religion
Is happiest when sheered
In springtime, before the real heat of summer sets in

My religion
Needs no money
My religion
Builds no temple
My religion
Casts no shadow
My religion
Is notoriously slow to condemn
Those who stumble chasing the inclined yearnings of the heart

My religion
Sways like music
My religion
Rolls like thunder
My religion
Loves its body
My religion
Would be happy in a world
Without clothing, without preachers, without shame

My religion
Cries at movies
My religion
Speaks in verse
My religion
Keeps its secrets
My religion
Hides eternally in the brush
Of every lover's lips kissing a promise of fulfillment

"Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair." — G. K. Chesterton

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